

Sending large files

Being able to send and receive large files electronically is vital to a thriving business. Christopher Phin explains how you can make sure important attachments don't get lost in transit

Q Whenever I try to email large presentations or more than one or two pictures to one of my clients, they often don't get through. Sometimes I will get an error message saying that the email is too large, or a kind of automatic response from my client rejecting the email for some reason. I know of a few occasions when someone has emailed stuff to me and I have never received it.

One of my more technically minded friends says I should use FTP, but I don't understand what this is, and I worry that if I don't grasp it properly myself, the people I work with – who are even less confident than I am when it comes to computers – have no hope of getting my files from me.

Audrey Boyce



A This is a very common problem, and it can be difficult to arrive at a solution that everyone you are sharing files with is comfortable using. File transfer protocol (FTP) is a flexible solution and most people have the necessary software (even if they don't realise that they do), but not everyone knows how to use it. This month we'll explain how to use FTP, and also examine some simpler solutions.

SIZE MATTERS

First, it's worth examining why sending large files by email is often a problem. The main stumbling block to sending files over email is their size. Both your outgoing SMTP server and the recipients' incoming POP3, IMAP or Exchange server impose limits on the size of messages they handle.

There's no hard and fast rule to determine these limits; they're entirely at the whim of the service providers. However, if you are working within a company, the chances are that you'll be able to send

and receive only the smallest of documents. The presentations and images you're trying to send are probably quite meaty, and you can forget about trying to email video. Consequently, even if you manage to send an 8MB file attached to an email, there's no guarantee recipient A will be able to receive it even if recipient B can. Generally speaking, you should avoid sending files larger than 3MB by email.

There's a further potential complication. The encoding methods used to prepare files for transfer via email not only add to a file's size, but can also differ between PCs and Macs. Most modern systems can deal with the various options, but anyone using a Mac – as is often the case in the creative industries – may have more difficulty opening emails. If you use Outlook and any of your recipients use non-Microsoft applications, such as Thunderbird, you might run into the problem of them receiving cryptic winmail.dat files. See Microsoft's Knowledge Base support article at <http://support.microsoft.com/kb/290809> for more information.

INTRODUCTION

Email attachments are the perfect way to send a few Word documents, but when it comes to transferring larger files from one computer to another, the limitations of email soon become obvious. This is particularly true in business, where IT departments often restrict outgoing and incoming emails to a few megabytes.

Here, Christopher Phin demonstrates the alternatives. He'll equip you with the knowledge necessary to send and receive large files yourself, and also help you understand the methods that others may use.

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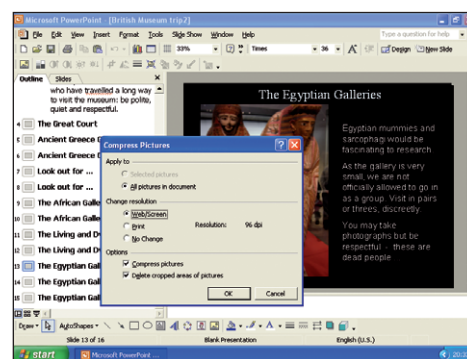
File management Archiving and compression

It's worth compressing files inside a single archive before sending them, regardless of which option you pick from the techniques described above. Files are more likely to arrive in one piece when compressed, and as an added bonus should take less time to transfer.

All modern computer systems can create and decompress Zip archives without extra software, so this format is a good choice for maximum compatibility. Stuffit (.sit or .sitx files) can offer more efficient compression, particularly when sending JPEGs, and you can get a decompression client for Windows, Mac and Linux. Zip is still the best choice in most cases; it is popular and doesn't require recipients to download extra software.

There are some manual steps you can take to slim down your files, too. Do you really need to send full-resolution, 10-megapixel photos? If not, resample them at a lower resolution before you send them by email, or email a link to an online photo album on a photo-sharing site such as Flickr.

PowerPoint presentations are often bloated because of needless picture information. Choose Compress Pictures from the Pictures toolbar to trim out parts of pictures that aren't shown, and resample print-resolution images for screen use.

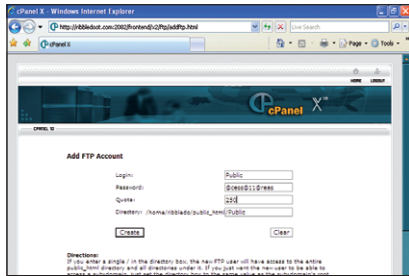


▲ Choose Compress Pictures to trim out unwanted parts of a picture in a PowerPoint presentation



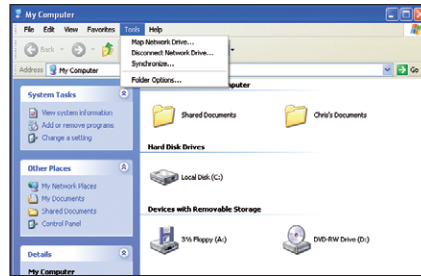
Networking skills Streamlining FTP access with Windows XP

If you have the option, set up dedicated FTP accounts for different users through your hosting service's control panel. You may also want to configure a general-access 'drop box', the details for which you can give out quickly and easily.



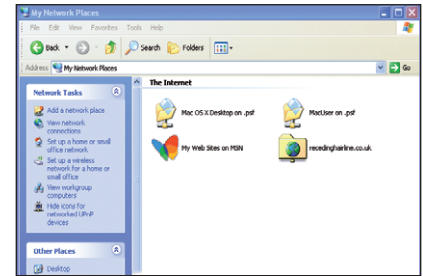
▲ Create FTP accounts to allow different people to access your storage space

From the Tools menu of any Explorer window, select Map Network Drive. Select a free drive letter from the list, then click on 'Sign up for online storage or connect to a network server'. Work through the wizard with your login details.



▲ For extra convenience, map a network drive to an FTP site

Your FTP server will appear as a network drive in My Computer, and can also be accessed by clicking through to My Network Places. Files can be copied to and from this drive as if it was a local drive, but don't expect it to be as quick.



▲ Double-clicking the site in your network places allows you to upload and download files

The easiest solution to all this is to use a service such as mailbigfile.com. There are a few such services, yousendit.com being another well-known example, and an exhaustive list at <http://tinyurl.com/ftwq5>. They all work in the same way. You go to the website, enter a recipient's email address and click to browse your hard disk to find the large file you want to send. It is best if you stuff multiple items into one archive (see the 'Archiving and compression' box, below left, for details). Then click Send File.

The system uploads the file to its servers and sends an email to your recipient that includes a direct link to the file you just uploaded. In effect, it's just automating the process of using an FTP server, but it's so simple that anyone can use it. There are some limitations, though. The free versions of both services mentioned above allow you to send files only up to 100MB in size, and the link expires in a week. It's still a handy way to send large files, though.

Both services mentioned offer premium services, but mailbigfile.com's £10 per year Pro account is particularly good value, allowing up to 2GB secure transfers, and sends you notification when your file is downloaded by the recipient.

SETTING UP AN FTP SERVER

If you want to do things yourself, you'll need to set up an FTP server. The good news is that, if you have internet access, you probably already have a little FTP space at your disposal. Most internet service providers (ISPs) give you a few hundred megabytes of space when you sign up with them. Ostensibly it's to build a website

with, but you can use it to transfer files just as easily. Unfortunately, access to these FTP storage spaces is usually governed by the same login details you use for your ISP-provided email account, so it's not a great idea to share these details with business partners or anyone else you want to keep away from your email messages.

It is far better to sign up with a dedicated hosting company. Many hosting deals, such as the one you might have used to host your company's website, allow you to create multiple FTP login details. You could, for example, create separate accounts for different classes of user: one for clients, one for suppliers, and one as a drop-box for yourself to shuttle files back and forth. This way, you can happily give out these login details to each group without worrying that they'll see files from the others or, indeed, change the vital files that power your website.

Ideally, you and your recipient would log into the FTP server using these login details, either with Explorer or with a dedicated FTP client such as FileZilla (<http://filezilla.sourceforge.net>), which is free. If you think this is beyond the abilities of your recipient, you can send them a URL that points directly to the file you want them to retrieve. This URL can have the FTP login details 'built into' it, which means it can look complex, but it is logical. It takes this form:

`ftp://username:password@URL:port//directory/file.extension`

Simply replace the relevant sections with your own details. Let's say you wanted to send a

link to a file called Prices.doc, stored on your FTP server, which is located in the Public folder at `ftp.mywonderfuldomain.com`. You've set up an FTP account to give access to this directory with the username 'anyone' and the password 'accessa11areas'. The URL will look like this:

`ftp://anyone:accessa11areas@ftp.mywonderfuldomain.com:21//Public/Prices.doc`

Now, when someone clicks on that link, they'll be taken straight to your file.

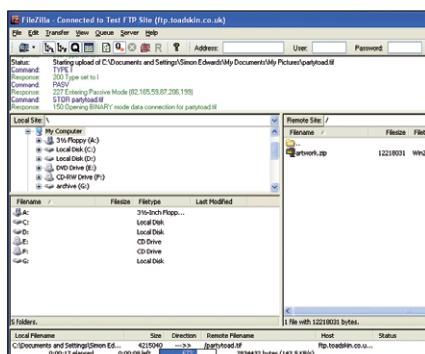
The port number for FTP is almost always 21, while for Secure FTP (SFTP) it's usually 22. You should also bear in mind that this link is case sensitive and that if you have any characters other than simple numbers and letters, you'll need to replace these with their 'percent encoding' alternatives. This means that you need to use %20 for a space, %26 for &, and so on. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percent-encoding> for more details.

Your hosting provider may impose limits on the amount of data you can transfer, which may be inaccurately referred to as 'bandwidth'. If you go over this, you'll be liable for extra charges. Some services allow you to define a level of traffic at which a warning email is sent to alert you of impending excess.

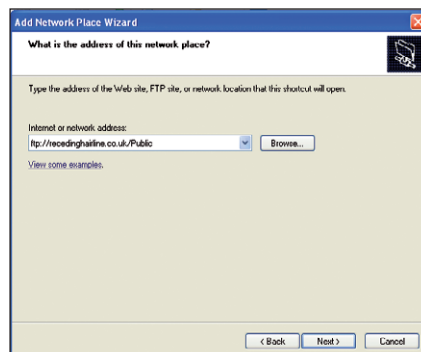
BROADLY SPEAKING

A similar concern affects everyone, regardless of the method used to transfer large files. Some broadband deals, especially the cheaper ones, limit your data transfers too, usually referring to this as a 'cap'. It may be 1GB, 3GB or another amount, it is usually applied monthly and normally you can use more, although you'll be billed per megabyte for the extra. Uploading files over consumer and small-business ADSL can be slow, too, so be patient.

Whether you use mailbigfile.com or FTP or just compress your files before attaching them to emails, sending large files is easy when you know how. **ES**



▲ FileZilla is a reliable, easy-to-use and completely free FTP program



▲ Adding an FTP site to your network places makes revisiting it easier

Next month

USING COMMERCIAL PRINTERS

How to deal with printing companies